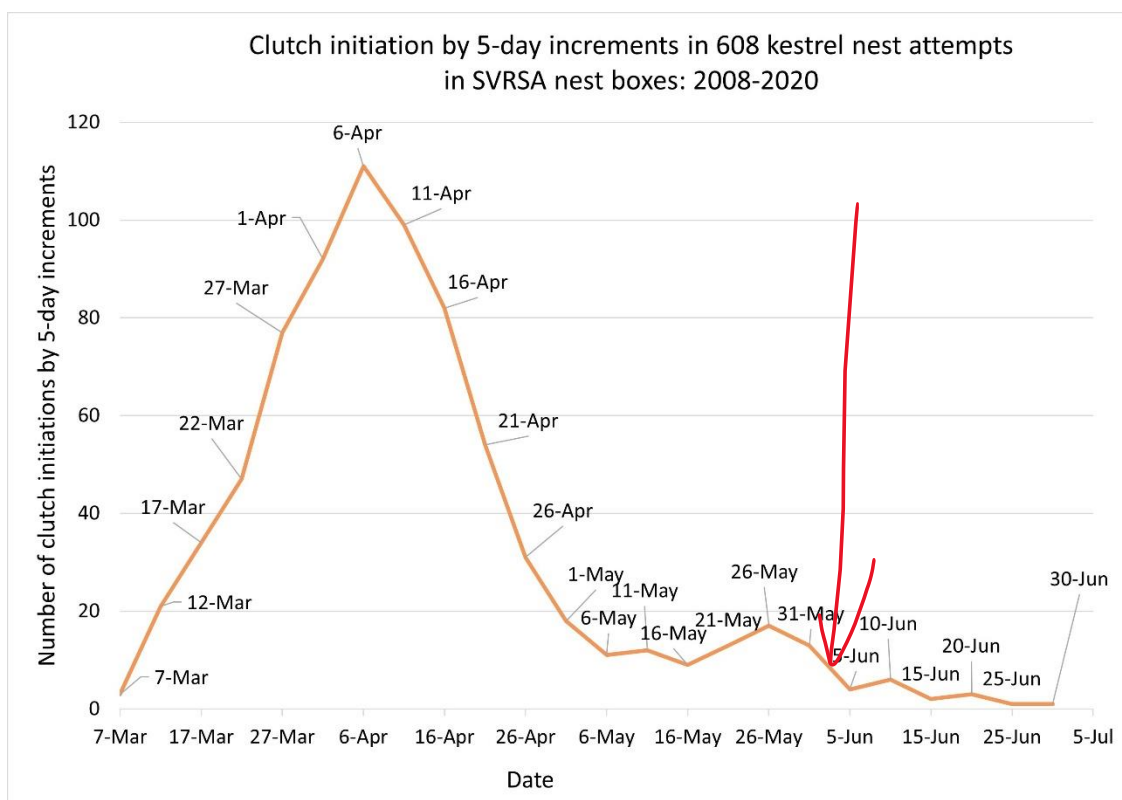


4th Update on the Shenandoah Valley Raptor Study Area July 11, 2024

Kestrels in the SVRSA

It has been 6 weeks since our previous update. We have been very busy with monitoring kestrels, barn owls and bluebirds in the SVRSA plus we took a hunting safari in Botswana from June 19-29th (from which we've taken a long time to recover)! If you would like to read our thrilling safari report – please send us an email requesting it. We'd be more than happy to share.

This year's kestrel season is almost over. The red arrow on the graph below shows approximately when these last few late clutches were initiated (late May/early June). You can see we are at the tail end, as every clutch to the left of the arrow has already been banded. Only 3 kestrel boxes with chicks remain to be banded this season, scheduled for July 21st. After the final results are recorded, we will calculate all the stats and present them in the final 2024 SVRSA update.



To date, in the 87 available SVRSA kestrel boxes there have been 75 nest attempts by kestrels = an 83% occupancy rate. We have banded so far 253 nestling kestrels in 64 nest boxes, giving an average of 3.95 chicks per box which is slightly below the long term average of 4.2 chicks per successful box. The (interim) 2024 total is significantly less than last year's crop of kestrels! Even if all 13 remaining eggs successfully hatch and survive to banding age (13-19 days old), the SVRSA will still have a lower # of kestrels produced this year. This is the first year in the past decade that the number of kestrel chicks banded in the SVRSA has gone down. Actually, we've been expecting this for quite some time. Most North American long term kestrel nest box programs reach a peak of productivity within 1-7 years, followed by a steep decline. Not sure if this year's decrease is considered a sign of steep decline; but it is definitely not growth!



Normally, birds that nest late in the season have smaller clutches, so we were shocked to see a late kestrel nest containing 6 eggs! Our lack of attention when checking this nest box (we forgot to plug it), let the adult female escape. We returned 5 days later and captured her in the box with her 6 newly hatched youngsters.

Admittedly, they were difficult to count, but there are 6 hatchlings in this photo. A normal on-time kestrel clutch size is 5 eggs and a normal clutch size for late nest is 4 or fewer. In addition, 6 egg clutches rarely have a 100% hatch rate. This kestrel

must be a super-MOM. She was a wild (unbanded) "after hatch year" bird, meaning she is a minimum of 2 years old and was not banded when we caught her. Now she carries our bird band.

Rarely do we find reptiles in kestrel boxes. Tim Rocke took this photo of a skink we pulled out of kestrel box and we found out that it had eggs! The skink and eggs were given back to the box full of hungry kestrels.



Many thanks to Ben Spory who has assumed the responsibility of monitoring/banding 5 kestrel boxes we installed near Bridgewater. Saves us a lot of time and gas! This year Ben captured a banded female kestrel in one of those 5 boxes but it was not our band. He reported it to Bird Banding Lab and this bird had been hatched and banded as a nestling in 2022 in one of Alan Williams' kestrel boxes near Luray VA. It is about 35 miles from Luray to Bridgewater in a southwest direction.

Recently we were banding kestrels on Long Meadow Road. A lady drove by, did a U-turn, and came back. She said she wasn't sure what we were doing, but it appeared to be a commendable cause so gave us all the cash she had in her - \$12 or so. We invited her to take a closer look at the cute kestrels and bands. Thanks much! We'll put it to good use for conservation.

Barn owls in the SVRSA

It has been a fairly good year for barn owls in the SVRSA. In 2023 we banded 15 barn owls in 5 nesting sites (silos). This year we have banded 37 of 40 young owls (the unmarked ones were too small) in 10 active nest sites. Fortunately, a new helper, Jason Gulosh, is also a climber so he was able to help us band owlets from some of the boxes we placed high in silos years ago. Here is Jason and several owlets in a box he cleaned out while we were banding them on the ground.





The adult female barn owl, presumably, looking down on Jason who asked, "Should I be worried?" Jill told him barn owls hardly ever attack!

Also, we'd like to thank Adam Good for climbing his silo to check our box, finding 4 barn owls that were ready to band a week ago! We met Adam, his mother Judy (a former banding subpermittee) and some neighbors, friends and relatives (sorry we didn't get everyone's names) for the banding event.



This is probably a female owl, note the buff coloration of breast. Normally, we band barn owlets before they get this old. When Jill climbed the silo 3 days after Adam, two of the youngest jumped out of the box and “parachuted” down with their fully feathered wings. Good thing Adam was standing by and caught them before they hit the silo floor and potentially injured themselves.



This one could be mistaken for an adult but for the white wisps of natal down atop its head. (We're talking about the owl - not the child silly)!

Rescue of an Injured Coopers Hawk

Many people who live in the study area know that we work with raptors, so they call us to come deal with (i.e. – capture and get to a rehab facility) injured birds. We received one such call while out banding kestrels on June 11th, so we rushed over and captured this unfortunate adult male Coopers Hawk that was unable to fly. But he sure could run. It took 3 people with an expertly tossed beach towel to capture him. Clearly, the bird had a broken wing and Jill inspected it for head trauma – which often isn't evident. The hawk was identified as a male due to his small size and was obviously an adult because of his adult plumage and red eyes. We placed the hawk in a cardboard box for transit and the landowner contacted the Wildlife Center of Virginia for rehabilitation. We were not sure rehab was possible, but it was WCV's call, not ours.



The next day we inquired about his status and WCV sent this response: *“Thanks for checking in. I wish I had better news, but the Cooper’s Hawk passed away very soon after it arrived. The exact cause of death is unknown, but it may be due to head trauma from a vehicle collision. I am so, so sorry. While this is not the outcome we had hoped for, please know that you prevented this hawk from prolonged suffering in the wild. Thank you for caring about this bird. Please do not hesitate to reach out if you have any questions.- Connor, Wildlife Center of Virginia”*

This was expected, but not ideal for the raptor.

A new species for us – Greater Crested Flycatcher

This winter we installed a new screech owl box that is visible from the kitchen window. Sometime in June we noticed a Great Crested Flycatcher (*Myiarchus crinitus*) perching in the hole and darting out on insect-catching forays. Initially we thought the bird was merely using the box as a convenient perch but, out of an abundance of caution, we used the endoscope to look inside. There were 5 nestling flycatchers inside! This was the first time this species had used one of our boxes.



Nest is constructed of pine needles and a few feathers. Note the 5 huddled chicks in corner with an unhatched egg. Although flycatchers are known to incorporate a snakeskin in their nests, this did not.



Young GCFL ready to banded; note the bright yellow belly which is typical of this species.

Lots of helping hands – many thanks to you all

Recently we've had lots of help from folks interested in raptors; **we really appreciate you:** Tim Rocke, Jason Gulosh, Robert Gettleman, Richard Morrison, Jordan Weinstein & his daughter Amber and friends James and Don. This summer our longtime friend and SVRSA helper, Tim, became a permitted bird bander!



Banding party left to right: Don, Jordan, Amber and Jill.

A fitting memorial



A friend of ours took this photo of a mural on the side of a building in downtown Harrisonburg. We Googled and found out this is a memorial to a friend, fellow bander, and former JMU professor who died last year: Charles "Zig" Ziegenfus. The painter is to be commended, as she really captured the beautiful plumage of a male kestrel. Here's a link to the story in the local paper: [Mural Dedication Honors Late JMU Professor | News | dnronline.com](#)

In a recent memo to all bird banders in North America, USGS wrote:

“If you discuss or share your banding projects to any public platform or social media, please indicate all banding, marking, and sampling is being conducted under a federally authorized Bird Banding Permit issued by the U.S. Geological Survey.”

As always, you can go to our Research Gate page to read any of our published papers: [ResearchGate](#)

Feel free to forward to friends and let them know we will add them to our email list if they contact us:

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If you want to be removed from this list, please contact us at above email.

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